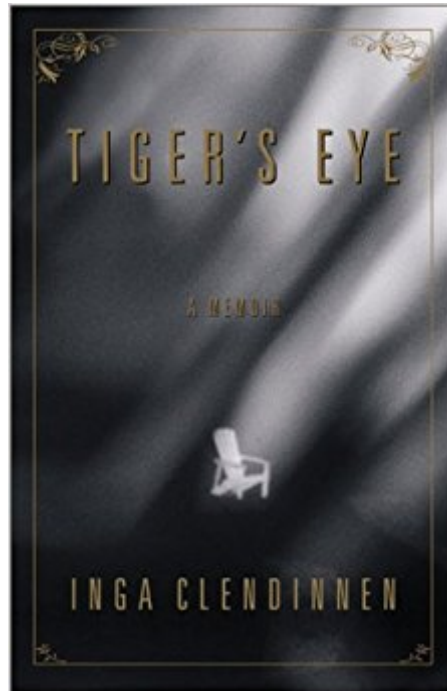




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# Tiger's Eye: A Memoir



## Synopsis

"A decade ago...I fell ill.'Fall' is the appropriate word; it is almost as alarming and quite as precipitous as falling in love." So begins Inga Clendinnen's beautifully written, revelatory memoir exploring the working of human memory and the construction of the self. In her early fifties, Clendinnen, Australia's award-winning historian of Mayan and Aztec history, was struck with an incurable liver disease, immobilized and forced to give up formal research and teaching. From her sickness comes a striking realization of literacy's protean possibilities: that writing can be a vital refuge from the debilitation of the body, and that the imagination can blossom as the body is enfeebled. Exiled from both society and the solace of history, and awaiting the mysterious interventions of medical science, Clendinnen begins to write: about her childhood in Australia, her parents, her neighbors, her own history. In addition to recovering half-forgotten stories -- about the town baker and his charming horse, Herbie, about the three elderly, reclusive sisters who let her into their clandestine world -- Clendinnen invents new ones to escape the confines of the hospital, with subjects ranging from the jealousies between sisters to a romantic, Kafkaesque encounter on a train. She also traces the physical, mental and moral impacts of her disease, and voices the terrifying drama of bizarre, vivid drug- and illness-induced hallucinations -- even one she had during her liver transplant. Along the way, Clendinnen begins to doubt her own memories, remembering things that she knows cannot have happened and realizing that true stories often produce a false picture of the whole. With her gifts for language and observation, Clendinnen deftly explores and maps the obscure terrain that divides history from fiction and truth from memory, as she tries to uncover the relationship between her former selves and the woman she is now. An exquisite hybrid of humorous childhood recollections, masterful fictions and probing history, *Tiger's Eye* is a uniquely powerful book about how illness can challenge the self -- and how writing can help one define and realize it.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In her early 50s, Australian historian Inga Clendinnen fell ill with acute liver disease. "'Fall' is the appropriate word," she writes. "It is ... like falling down Alice's rabbit hole into a world which might resemble this solid one, but which operates on quite different principles." Her imaginative, unconventional memoir mirrors the hallucinatory nature of this world as she mingles reminiscences, fiction, hospital sketches, and family profiles to chart the course of her physical and mental life from diagnosis through a successful liver transplant and recovery. Anyone who has ever been in a hospital will recognize the frail, vulnerable, disoriented state of mind she evokes in describing her time there. Yet Clendinnen also displays biting humor (especially in portraits of fellow patients) and an almost mystical sense of purpose as she seizes on writing as the tool to make sense of her situation. Childhood memories loom large, many invoking the beauty of the natural world, ever-present and overwhelming in rural Australia. Presiding over that childhood, her proud, stoical, impenetrable mother "provided me with an inspiring mystery: the obdurate opacity of other beings"--and sparked, Clendinnen believes, her lifelong pursuit of historical mysteries. But the experience of being seriously ill dominates this text. The title comes from her determination to emulate a zoo tiger she admires because he refuses to acknowledge his imprisonment: "I too was in a cage, with feeding times and washing times and bars at the side of my cot, and people coming to stare and prod ... whenever I felt the threat of the violation of self, I would invoke the vision of the tiger." For all the grim candor with which she evokes physical deterioration, Clendinnen also persuasively conveys her discovery that "illness casts you off, but it also cuts you free ... the clear prospect of death only makes living more engaging." --Wendy Smith

Although Australian author Clendinnen is a specialist in ancient Mexican cultures, readers may remember her best for *Reading the Holocaust*. Here, she turns her historian's eye inward, to make sense of the year when, in her 50s, she was felled by acute liver disease and found that only by writing could she free herself at least psychologically and intellectually from the confines of her hospital bed. Yet Clendinnen does not burden us with a sentimental account of her near-death

experience; instead, she carefully explores the root of history, fiction and the self: "Janus-faced" memory. In the course of writing, Clendinnen discovers that her memory is eel-like, selective, inaccurate and biased, despite her best efforts to pin it down. This realization leads her to new insights about historical inquiry and about the porous border delineating fact and fiction. At one point during her recovery, she was unexpectedly interrupted by hallucinations subconscious dreams that weave bits of her own history with fiction so she decided to try her hand at fiction, producing a series of brief, tantalizing characters and situations that deepen this devastatingly beautiful, intricate and wide-ranging work. Ultimately, though her exploration of "I" leads to better self-understanding, Clendinnen chooses not to dwell on herself, but to return to history, "where I began." Aimed at women of a certain age who are taking stock of themselves and the world around them, Clendinnen's book offers a rare and original meditation on the construction of the self. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

I haven't read this book in several years, but it still calls to me. It was beautifully written, poetic even. It's rare to look back over a distance of years (and this was a memoir about a woman I was not familiar with) and often think of how much this book touched me. I always think of it when I read another memoir which is what prompted me to write this review. Please pick up this book and read it, you will not regret it.

Brilliant piece of writing, and all through health issues. Hadn't heard of Inga before, but is an author, historian and anthropologist. Will read more of her work.

Tiger's Eye is Inga Clendinnen's account of her diagnosis of a rare liver disease, her rapidly debilitating illness, finally a liver transplant and ultimate if precarious recovery. But that is like saying Moby Dick is about whaling. This historian from Australia has written a superb treatise full of hard truths on both illness and memory. After all, the truth is not always carried on angels' wings. Along the way she also has written fiction-- short stories-- and some of the history of Australia. After her diagnosis of Active Auto-Immune Hepatitis, she began writing this memoir on her laptop computer, not knowing if she would live or not. She writes searing accounts of her hospitalization: the good, the bad, the indifferent hospital personnel. The visitors who came late and leave early, to get back to their lives outside an institution. Ms. Clendinnen writes: "What distinguishes the healthy from the ill--which is a more significant division in any society than class or gender or possibly even homelessness--is that the healthy consider feeling well to be the normal state of things." Then there

is memory and all the attendant problems. For example, two children of the same parents have different recollections of their parents, but they are both right. "Being ill had taught me how much of ourselves there is in all the stories we tell about the past." Ms. Clendinnen wanted to preserve the memories of her parents, to try to discover what they were like before she was born. The portraits, "as accurate as memory allows," the author would say, of her parents are the best thing I think in this book. Her descriptions of her mother Catherine, born in Melbourne in 1897-- and her futile attempts ever really to know her mother made my eyes water. Her mother's hard life was in some part her own making. Not all her sisters, for example, were as miserable as she. About her mother's death, Ms. Clendinnen writes "how could her life be ending when it had not yet begun? Bound from childhood in a net of unsought obligations, she fought hard, but with weapons which always turned and lacerated her own flesh. In the desolation of old age, with death imminent, I think she finally knew herself to have been trapped, and defeated, from the beginning." Ms. Clendinnen named this memoir *Tiger's Eye* after her favorite animal, the tiger, "because he was the only animal who did not acknowledge he was in a cage. . . I too was in a cage, with feeding times and washing times and bars at the side of my cot, and people coming to stare and prod, but the kaleidoscope of the horror of helplessness ceased to turn because I withdrew my consent from it." Like Melville's Ishmael, the now wiser writer lived to tell her tale: "Illness granted me a set of experiences otherwise unobtainable. It liberated me from the routines which would have delivered me, unchallenged and unchanged, to discreet death. Illness casts you out, but it also cuts you free. I will never take conventional expectations seriously again, and the clear prospect of death only makes living more engaging." There is so much to learn from Ms. Clendinnen's ordeal-- about illness, about courage, about getting on with our lives. A very fine book indeed.

I have to disagree with the other reviewer with 5 stars. The book just didn't grab me as I hoped it would, and it was a bit of a struggle to complete. I thought about ditching it at around page 50, but continued on to see if it improved--which it did to a small extent. After reading other books about people with illnesses, I found that *Tiger's Eye* paled in comparison. Go for "It's Not About the Bike" by Lance Armstrong if you want a more gripping personal account of someone dealing and overcoming serious illness. Now that's a real page-turner!

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